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WHEN THE STARS SPEAK

Romans 16:25-27

INTRODUCTION

A young soldier was training to be a paratrooper. He was about to make his first parachute jump out of a plane. A veteran sergeant told him, “All you have to do is remember 4 easy steps. One, when you’re told to jump, go immediately. Two, count one thousand one, one thousand two, one thousand three, then pull the rip cord. Three, in the unlikely event that your chute malfunctions, quickly pull the cord for your backup chute. Finally, when you land, wait for the truck that will come by and pick you up to bring you back to base.” The young soldier boarded the plane. He took his place in line as they prepared to jump. His turn came, and when told to jump he immediately launched out of the aircraft. He counted to 3 as instructed, then pulled the rip cord. But nothing happened. The chute malfunctioned. He immediately pulled the cord for the emergency chute, and to his dismay it didn’t work either. At that point, in disgust he said, “Yeah, and I’ll bet when I land the truck won’t show up either.”

Sometimes it feels like life is full of obstacles, setbacks and disappointments. It gets easy To think maybe Eeyore was right, we should just expect things to go badly. Life can be hard and frustrating. Earlier this year the *Wall Street Journal* carried an article about the fact that vinyl records have become popular again. Sales of vinyl records doubled in 2021 and vinyl records outsold CD’s last year for the first time in 30 year. They also outsold digital albums. The article said this trend is not driven by nostalgic old folks hanging on to the old ways, but by millennials. Why are millennials buying old technology? The article explained, “Stressed out by fears of climate change, political strife and pandemic variants, a growing number of younger adults have been spending more time…seeking refuge in their past. Many have fond childhood memories of parents playing vinyl albums in the 1980’s and early 1990’s, and they yearn to regain that feeling of security.”

Life will hold challenges for all of us. Yeah, life is hard, then you die. We need something a lot stronger than vinyl records and nostalgic feelings to enable us to live in peace, to be joyful, faithful and hopeful as we navigate this world. The final verses of the book of Romans remind us of three aspects of God’s character that are essential to us living well in a difficult world. Let’s look at Romans 16:25-27.

Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, **26**but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from[[f](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans%252016&version=NIV#fen-NIV-28363f)] faith— **27**to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

EXPOSITION

GOD WILL ENABLE US TO STAND

1. These final verses of this letter are a sort of benediction, a statement of praise to God. Paul first praises God as, “Him who is able to establish you.” Life was not easy for the people in the church in Rome. Many of them were slaves. All of them dealt with some opposition and ostracism from their culture as well as the constant threat of persecution. Paul reminded them that in the middle of all the hardships that life might bring their way God is able to establish them. True of us as well.
2. Paul literally says God has the power to establish us. The Greek word translated “establish” means “to support, to make fast, to fix something so it stands upright and immovable.” A number of years ago I had an infection that affected my inner ear. It threw off my equilibrium and made standing up a far from routine operation. The first day or so in order to stand up I actually had to put a hand on something like a nearby table. That table “established” me, enabled me to stand and be at least somewhat stable.
3. Paul says God is able to do that for us. God has unlimited power. In Job 42:2 Job says to God, “I know that you can do all things, no purpose of yours can be thwarted.” In Matthew 19:26 Jesus said, “With God all things are possible.” Well, that’s great. God is really powerful. He is all powerful.

But Jeff Bezos is astronomically rich. His net worth is $138.6 billion. He could solve any financial problem I might ever conceivably face by choosing to give me one tenth of that .6 billion. That would work out to $60 million, which he could give away and still have $138.59 billion. I can’t even imagine having $60 million. But Jeff Bezos isn’t going to share even one red cent with me. What if God chose not to share any of his unlimited power with me?

Fortunately, that’s not the case. In Ephesians 1:19 Paul prayed that we would understand “his incomparably great power *for us who believe*.” His power is for us. In Ephesians 3:20 Paul prayed, “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his great power that is at work within us.” His immeasurably great power is at work within us!

We need to go through life without wobbling or toppling over. That means to live not threatened, to be at peace and secure. It means having a solid foundation on which to stand, a platform from which we can deal with whatever life throws at us. To be established is to not become angry or frustrated when life doesn’t go our way. It means not being hostile or resentful of people who get in our way.

1. Life has lots of opportunities for us to be upset, annoyed, angry, impatient. What can help us deal with that? God will establish us, make us stable, able to stand no matter what happens.
2. We think enough money, or position, or success will give us the platform we need to be able to live without all the frustration, anger, fear or resentment. It’s not true. I found it kind of humorous when I saw a brief news story about quarterback Tom Brady. He is the epitome of all the things we think should make life work perfectly. He is absurdly successful, like no one else in history, he is famous, he is ridiculously wealthy. The story related that in a recent game things weren’t going very well for his team. He was so frustrated that he slammed the tablet computer he was looking at on the sidelines down on the ground and broke it. That doesn’t seem to me to be the way I’d be handling things if I was really established. I can’t speak for Tom Brady, maybe he’s fine with it. I’d just like more peace and calm strength.
3. Paul says that God is the one who establishes us. This is about him, not about our ability. How does God establish us?
4. Paul says God enables us to stand by the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is in keeping with the revelation of the mystery which has previously been hidden. Ooh, mystery. That sounds exciting. What mystery did he mean?
5. The idea of a mystery as Paul used it was a little different than we usually think of it. We link mystery with something kind of spooky, some impenetrable enigma that we have to somehow solve. That’s not what Paul meant. I think the word “surprise” might actually be closer to what Paul intended.
6. Little Wesley just had his third birthday and he now really likes the idea of getting presents. He loved opening the presents that he received and playing with the new toys. After the birthday was over he informed us that he’d like more presents. We told him that in a few months Christmas was coming and there would be more presents then. He’s ready for that to come any day now. One thing that makes presents so much fun is the surprise. A present is best when you don’t know what is in that brightly wrapped package. If you already know what it is, it really isn’t as exciting. The fun is that you know there’s something in that box, but you don’t know what it is until it is opened.
7. The mystery that Paul referred to is a surprise like that. It was not an enigma that humans had to unravel. It was a surprise. They knew there was something in the box, but they didn’t know exactly what it was until it was opened. God has established us by opening the box.
8. In the Old Testament anyone could know that there was something in the box. God let them see the box, but they didn’t know what was inside. God told Israel, beginning with Abraham, that he was going to bless the entire world through them. But they didn’t know how he was going to do that. God gave Israel laws, but they were never able to fully live by them. But God said even though they didn’t keep his covenant, there would be forgiveness for them and they would still be his people. This forgiveness was linked to sacrifices. But how could animals being killed take care of their failings? How could that result in them being forgiven? They didn’t know. God said that Israel was his chosen people, but then said there would be a day when all people would worship him. How was that going to work? God made known that a Messiah would come and be a king whose reign would never end, yet who would somehow also suffer and die. How could both of those things be true?
9. What was in the box? It was that Messiah would indeed come, would die as the sacrifice that brings forgiveness for all sins for all people so that they could all be in God’s kingdom, Jew and Gentile alike. The Messiah would come and die, then later come back to rule forever. This was the surprise that no one could have imagined until it was revealed. Now anyone, by faith in Jesus the Messiah, could be forgiven and enter God’s kingdom.
10. This was the message that Paul has laid out in great detail in the book of Romans. He began in 1:16 by saying it is the power of God. It is the power of God that enables us to stand.
11. In Colossians 1:27 Paul wrote, “God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” This is the mystery revealed, Christ in you, the hope of glory. That is God’s big surprise for us.
12. Some friends invited us to go to a Padres game with them this week. We were mostly looking forward to spending time with our friends, since we knew how the game would turn out, because every time we go to a game the Padres lose. It’s uncanny. It almost seems supernatural. But there was a mystery about that game, a surprise for us. Our friends didn’t tell us where we would be sitting. Our seats were in the second row. I mean right down on the field. They included food. It started with a full delicious dinner in a dining room that looked onto the batting cages under the stadium seating where we could watch the players practice. The food was terrific. Throughout the game we could get anything we wanted to eat. One of us was in heaven, eating cotton candy, cake pops, frozen lemonade, crackerjacks, and more. Here’s the thing. Padres personnel were stationed throughout that area keeping out the hoi polloi that didn’t belong there. Only those with tickets were allowed into the area. Laurie and I are in the hoi polloi. We had no right to be there. We didn’t belong. But we were continually welcomed in with smiles, because our friends brought us in. They belonged there, and we got to enjoy it because we were with them. I had no fear that I was going to set off a hoi polloi alarm, that I would be found out and removed from those blessed precincts. It worked very well for me and I was exceedingly thankful to our friends. That’s like the mystery of Christ in you the hope of glory. We get to participate in the glory of God and his kingdom. We experience that to a degree even now, and are guaranteed it forever, even though we don’t belong there. We get that because Christ is in us by faith.
13. This is our hope of glory, Jesus Christ in us. His presence in us is what guarantees our glorious, eternal future. It is what even now is changing us, making us more like Jesus. We don’t present to God our works, our abilities, our religion. We are not rejected because of our flaws and failings. We present to God Jesus Christ in us by faith. That makes us secure in him. The more we let Jesus Christ have his way in us, make him Lord of everything in our lives, the more we will have his goodness, his patience, his kindness, his peace, his joy, his love, his courage and his strength. That is what will enable us to deal with whatever life throws at us. Jesus Christ in us, the hope of glory.

GOD IS WISE

1. The second thing about God that establishes us is that God is wise. Paul calls him “the only wise God.” That means that no one is wise in the way that God is wise. God is the most wise being in existence, and the gap between him and the next wise being is immense.
2. Proverbs 2:4 says wisdom is so valuable we should search for it like hidden treasure. Thomas Cavendish was a 16th century English privateer who reportedly buried treasure of gold and silver valued at $5 million at Palemano Point, which is on the west coast of the Big Island of Hawaii, south of Kona. Several expeditions have searched for it, to no avail so far. However, if you somehow came in possession of information as to the location of the treasure, would you search for it? Of course! What could be better than a search for pirate treasure, me hearties? What could be better is a search for the real treasure, which is wisdom.
3. Proverbs 8:11 says, “Wisdom is more precious than rubies, and nothing you desire can compare with her.”
4. Why is wisdom so valuable? In Proverbs 8:35 wisdom says, “Those who find me, find life.” Wisdom is valuable because it is key to finding life. In Proverbs 8:36 wisdom says, “those who fail to find me harm themselves; all who hate me, love death.”
5. Wisdom is not about being smart, about having a stratospheric IQ. It is about mastering life. Wisdom is the art of living well. Wisdom is what enables us to make the most out of life, to live as humans were designed by God to live, experiencing true fullness of life and satisfaction.
6. It is possible to be extremely smart, and still lack true wisdom. I recently read a couple of interesting pieces of writing. One was the book, *Is Atheism Dead?* by Eric Metaxas. In it he presented a strong case that science is increasingly making the point that there is a Creator. He discussed how scientists now know that the universe had a beginning. It is not eternal. The obvious implication of that is if the universe had a beginning, someone or something caused it to begin, suggesting a creator. Then there is evidence of massive fine tuning of both the universe and the earth itself that makes it apparent that the universe and the earth are specifically designed to support life on earth. Design implies a designer. These things are undeniable and strongly suggest a Creator. To believe otherwise is to deny the evidence from science.
7. I read an article that went in a very different direction. The author suggested that the structure of the universe has some resemblance to the structure of the human brain. I did not find his suggestion convincing, but for sake of discussion, let’s grant his thesis. It’s what he did with it that amazed me. He drew the conclusion that maybe the universe itself is intelligent! The logical leap was astounding. This looks a little bit like that, so it must be the same thing. Wow, that’s an impressive fallacy. The author wasn’t done. This writer posited the idea that maybe there have been multiple big bangs. Then he tripled down suggesting that maybe there are many universes. This is necessary because the fine tuning of this universe looks designed to support life on earth. But if there are many universes maybe this one just happened to be the one that accidentally is suitable for life on earth.
8. Where it became very interesting was at the end of the article. There the writer showed a bit of honesty. He admitted that there is exactly zero evidence for any of the ideas he suggested. The evidence of science actually points away from his ideas. Given that, why come up with those ideas? Because he is desperate to deny that there is a Creator God. The person is clearly smart, but if you’re making stuff up to enable you to believe something that the evidence clearly indicates is not true, you are far from wise.
9. Let’s grant for a moment the Bible’s premise. God created the heavens and the earth. He gave life to creatures, including human beings. Would that not suggest that he is wiser than any human being? Wouldn’t it make sense that he would know more than anyone how to master life?
10. 1 Corinthians 1:25 says, “The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom.” God doesn’t do foolish things. He does things that may look and sound crazy to us. But those craziest things, the things we think are nuts, are wiser than the smartest things the smartest human beings have ever done.
11. Our best, highest wisdom, doesn’t even show up on God’s scale of wisdom. Author Mark Buchanan says, “Compare the wisdom of the smartest people, the wisest guru or philosopher, to God, and they are nincompoops. In comparison to God, everything else looks like sheer and utter and bumbling folly.”
12. How does knowing that God is “God only wise,” the embodiment of true and complete wisdom, far wiser than any human, help us when we are dealing with the difficulties of life?
13. Remember that wisdom is about mastering life, about how to live well. Knowing that God is wiser than any human means he knows the most and the best what can make our lives the most satisfying.
14. God has shared his wisdom with us. He tells us how to live. He gives us truth and principles for how to deal with the frustrations of life. Proverbs 3:5-6 says, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.”
15. Trusting in the Lord with all our heart and leaning not on our own understanding means believing and acting on the reality that God knows what is best for us. So when he tells us to live for his glory, to forgive those who hurt us, to deny ourselves and put others first, to always love, to always speak with the goal of building others up, to be patient, to be kind, we know this is the way to master life. This is how we can truly have life.
16. God’s wisdom impacts us in another way. Knowing that God is wise means trusting in his will even when we don’t understand why life is going the way it is. We have our plan for life, but when it blows up, we trust in God’s wisdom.
17. This week in my ongoing misadventure with a possible melanoma I saw a dermatologist. I’d never seen this doctor before. He told me something no doctor has ever told me before. In the process of examining me he said I have a somewhat rare aspect of my physiology. He said this physiology is prevalent among football quarterbacks and pitchers in baseball. I can’t explain what he said, but I got that part about quarterbacks and pitchers. It made me think that God has played a trick on me. I’m supposed to have the physiology ideal for a quarterback or pitcher, but I’m too small for football and somehow I have a noodle arm. This physiology is supposed to make me ideally suited for those positions, but somehow God has seen to it that it hasn’t worked out for me at all. I could easily decide that God has played a trick on me. Or I could accept that God is wise and is working for my good. I think the second approach is best.
18. Job’s wife said to him in Job 2:9, “Are you still maintaining your integrity? Curse God and die.” Man, that’s rough. She’s not likely to be known in history as one of the great cheerleaders of all time.
19. We sometimes forget that most of the tragedy and loss that Job went through his wife also experienced. She, too, was overwhelmed by grief. All of her children were killed! How could a mother survive such pain? She’s hurting, bitter and maybe angry at God. She just wants it all to stop.
20. But it is Job’s response that is so important. He said in verse 10, “You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?” My first reaction to his question is, “Shall we accept good from God and not trouble. Well, yeah. I want no part of trouble from God. Why would I want trouble from him? I want God to give me good.”
21. Job’s statement is a reminder of some crucial truth. First, we live in a world that has been invaded by evil. It is a broken place. If you live here some of that brokenness and evil is going to land on you. That’s part of the deal. Second, and maybe more important, Job is saying that God is good and has a good and wise plan for us. Sometimes that plan will entail trouble. We need to accept that and trust in God’s wisdom even when we don’t know why.
22. ESPN had a story this week about D. J. Uigalelei, the quarterback on Clemson University’s football team. He probably has physiology like mine, but for him it worked better. But over the past year he has gone through some very difficult times. Critics have roasted him mercilessly. But here’s how he has responded. “That’s life, man. Everybody has problems. But I never questioned God’s plan. God led me through a time that, it wasn’t the best, but he led me out to the other side. I feel like God did that for a reason to make me a better person, a stronger person.” Good for you, D. J. He believes that God is the God only wise.
23. The people of Israel surely cried out to God when they suffered as slaves in Egypt. Moses must have wondered what was good about him being exiled from Egypt after being in the royal house and ending up tending sheep out in an arid wilderness. The people of Israel must have wondered what was good about after being initially freed from Egypt ending up trapped on the shore of the Red Sea with the Egyptian army bearing down on them. Ruth surely wondered what was good about her husband dying and leaving her destitute. David often poured out his heart to the Lord when Saul was hunting him in an effort to kill him when David had done nothing wrong. The disciples of Jesus surely wondered what could possibly good about Jesus being executed. Paul no doubt wondered where the good was in his being falsely accused and put in chains for years. Shall we accept good from God and not trouble? No, we trust in God’s wisdom, whether we get good or trouble, because we know that God is good and he loves us.

GOD IS TO BE GLORIFIED

1. God is a God of glory. When all is right with anything it gives glory to God. Psalm 19:1 says, “The heavens declare the glory of God.” They do, don’t they? I think there’s an interesting lesson in the night sky for us. Our culture seeks to remove God from the picture and focus everything on humans. People are the center. Where we live we sort of have a picture of that. Humans in the city produce so much light at night that it blocks out the stars in the sky. We look up and see a few stars, but we aren’t blown away by it. Then we go out to some more isolated location where there are few lights, and what we see at night astounds us. The vast display of stars is magnificent. In its beauty and massiveness it speaks to us of God’s might and his creativity. It displays an aspect of his glory.
2. Think about your skin. The amount of pressure needed to trigger the nerves and send the sensation of feeling to your brain varies in different parts of your body. The soles of your feet require 250 milligrams of pressure. The back of your hand only requires 12 milligrams. The back of your forearm requires 33 milligrams. But the amazing thing is that if someone puts a 100 milligram weight on your forearm while you are blindfolded you will feel it. However, if the weight is left there, after 4 seconds you will no longer feel it. Your brain, sensing there is no danger, ignores the messages. If it did not do that, it would be irritating and overwhelming for you to wear clothes. Your brain adapts. The palm of your hand has globules of fat, so soft as to be almost fluid, woven together with collagen fibers. If you grab a baseball bat, or a hammer, this allows the tissue to actually conform to the shape of the handle of the bat or hammer. Engineers are astounded at this system that perfectly balances strength and pliability. My point here is that our bodies, even our skin, declare the glory of God.
3. Everything in creation, when it is doing what is intended, declares in some way the glory of God. How does this help us? It reminds us that this is why we exist. We are created to give glory to God. When we are fully alive, fully human and living as he intended, we, too, give glory to God. This is the purpose of our existence.
4. This helps us because we can approach everything that happens in our lives with this as our goal. The focus in all that happens is to bring glory to God, whether what happens is joyful, impressive, easy, happy, painful, difficult or sorrowful.
   1. Josef Tson was a pastor in Romania during the years that nation was under communist rule. He was the best known pastor in that country before he was exiled. Because he spoke boldly for Christ he was arrested. His interrogators threatened to kill him every day for 6 months. Finally he said to them, “Your supreme weapon is killing. My supreme weapon is dying. My preaching will speak 10 times louder after you kill me.” He said that he fully expected to be killed by secret police, but he said in that situation, “God became more real to me than ever before.” He said, “This world, with all its evil, is God’s deliberately chosen environment for people to grow…It is a grace given us now to prepare us to live forever.”
   2. He chose in the face of a severe trial to focus on bringing glory to God and serving him. He said that had a surprising result. He said the person who does that, “discovers that, in the final analysis, he is the one who has harvested the greatest blessings.”
5. The last two Saturday nights Laurie and I went to weddings. Both of them took place at the homes of the grooms. But these were no simple back yard events. They were both elaborate events. The parents’ lives over the past few months were dominated by preparation for them. Enormous time, energy and expense went into pulling both of them off. The parents talked about the upheaval of it all. But they weren’t begrudging about the cost to themselves. They were filled with joy. And both events were beautiful, spectacular affairs. They were glorious. But they were glorious most of all because of what they meant. If those parents had just had big parties, they would have been nice events, but that would have been all. But these events were glorious and will be remembered for the rest of their lives because of what they meant. The meaning was the source of the joy and made all the trouble of the events far more than worth while. And that is how our lives become glorious and filled with joy. It is by the meaning of them. The meaning that will make them worthwhile, joyful, beautiful, spectacular, is living for the glory of God. It is saying the same thing the stars say when they speak.

CONCLUSION

This is the end of Paul’s letter to the church at Rome. He has explained the Gospel of grace through Jesus Christ, and we have learned it is through this gospel that we are established, secure in his love and grace, his children forever. We have seen the wisdom of God, for he had an astounding plan to rescue us that has spanned centuries. It is a brilliant plan that is far beyond anything humans would ever have come up with. So in the end, we have seen that truly God is glorious, and is deserving of our praise, of glorifying him for what he has done and continues to do even in our lives today.

That God has the power to establish us gives us peace, security and assurance that we can make it through whatever comes our way. He establishes us by the Great Surpirse, Christ in us, the hope of glory.

That God is wise gives us hope and the ability to accept whatever may happen as well as motivation to obey God, for he is wise and knows what is for our good.

That God deserves glory gives us a purpose and a goal that will direct and sustain us in everything that happens. It makes it possible for us to live gloriously in all circumstances.